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Face Value

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FACE VALUE

By

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THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

**For the Degree of Master of Arts
With a Major in Ceramics**

**Governors State University
University Park, IL 60484**

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TABLE of CONTENTS

Title Page.....	page i
Table of Contents.....	page ii
Text Body.....	pages 1 - 13
Image Section.....	pages 14 - 21
Endnotes.....	pages 22 - 24
Appendix A.....	pages 25 - 32
Bibliography.....	pages 33 - 34

The human face is the most universally important focus of communication.

It is a significant source of identity and the most expressive means of nonverbal communication. We use our faces to speak and express emotions. We use faces to recognize friends or foes; to spot family resemblances; and to consider attractiveness or unattractiveness.

Gleaned from a number dictionaries, my interpretation of what is meant by taking something or someone at "face value" means to accept that idea, object, or person because of the way it first looks or seems, without thinking about what else it could mean, and to accept that the idea, object, or person is exactly what it appears to be.

In the first phase of my sculptural ceramic work I use the human face in caricature to playfully parody both the contradictions between literal and ambiguous interpretations of terms in the English language, and how we function in society surrounded by human stereotypes and the language generated by those stereotypes. I feel that the use of humor invites the viewer to participate actively in experiencing the art.

By using the term "face value" the humorous use of a word, or combinations of words can have different meanings and possible applications as a play on words or pun.

The second phase of my sculptural work involved the process of incorporating the image of the human face cast from real life. I realized I needed to challenge myself technically and take my art from a "childlike caricature" level of innocence to a more "adult" level of life

experiences. I did not want to give up that sense of playfulness, so I kept with the human stereotypes and "play on words" or pun theme. However during this period of creativity a personal event happened in my life and the sense of playfulness and parody became bittersweet.

The third phase of my work portrays "implied" faces that exaggerates a fear I had as a child and still haunts my subconscious to this day.

My first series of work was inspired by the embellished heads and faces of TV cartoon characters, comic books, the Sunday newspaper comics and the tribal art depiction of heads in the Central American and South Pacific cultures. In this series I use the human face in caricature as a vehicle to humorously communicate the sensitivities and insensitivities of human behavior.

These small, pinch-pot style heads out of stoneware, terra cotta and porcelain come to life through abstract cartoon-like faces, a sort of Ziggy meets Dilbert. The faces on the heads have just a brow, eyes, a nose and a hole for the mouth. There are short heads and tall heads, thin heads and fat heads. No two are identical. Just like in our world of 6.7 billion human faces, each face is unique. The series consists of groups of one to five inch sculpted abstract cartoon-like heads is a playful spoof on human stereotypes and humorously exploits the ambiguities of the English language. In many cultures, especially those of Mexico and Easter Island, sculptures of heads and faces were usually of royalty. However, in modern Western

culture, when one uses the symbolic representation of the head to label people “head case”, “egghead” or “bonehead” one is using these terms or labels to mockingly label their intelligence, behavior, status, appearance or their perceived station in life. With my sculptures, I am turning the stereotype into something to laugh at by illustrating the literal meaning of each label and visually changing the insulting meaning to a humorous parody.

The piece, “Head case”(Figure 1) is depicted as 24 small porcelain heads in a cardboard box, or a case of heads. The slang term “head case”¹ is defined as a mentally deficient person. The term “egghead”² is a term used sarcastically to define an intelligent person. “Eggheads” (Figure2) is 12 egg size heads made of stoneware placed in a cardboard egg carton. Bonehead³ is a label meaning stupid person. The piece “Boneheads” (Figure 3) is a pile of porcelain bones with heads growing at the end of each drumstick covered in real B-B-Q sauce and surrounded with soiled napkins. “Shish-ka-Bob” (Figure 4) is a visual pun of the word shis-ke-bab⁴ made of saggar fired stoneware heads with screaming facial expressions linked together with skewers placed on a small charcoal grill. The reason I chose to place these four pieces in real containers instead of making ceramic containers that look real, is to emphasize the illusion of reality, creating in the mind of the viewer the question “What is real?”

The piece "Headline" (Figure 4) is my literal translation of the word that actually has 4 or 5 meanings depending on the dictionary you use. The definition most of us are familiar with is "a line at the head of the page, containing title, page number, etc" ⁵. A headline is usually located on the front page and is the attention grabber for the news. I illustrate the word headline literally to mean a line of heads mounted on a 4 foot by 4 inch board interacting, conversing and ignoring each other.

This piece involved much experimentation with the technical process of testing a variety of firing techniques. The results were a unique blend of head caricatures I used to artistically represent people from all walks of life. These characters appear to be waiting in a line and exhibit different relationships with each other in that line. Some are facing each other as if deep in conversation. Others are looking away as signaling not to be bothered. Two heads are very close to each other as to suggest a possible intimate relationship, and the one in front looks forward with fierce determination and pride of being first in line! The significance of this piece is that it demonstrates familiarity with the technical aspects of clay and the use of the creative imagination required of any professional artist.

The next piece is called "Quiverfull" (Figure 6). It is titled after the Christian "Quiver full" movement deriving its name from the Bible scripture passage Psalm 127:3-5, where many children are metaphorically referred to as the arrows in a full quiver⁶. It is a movement among some conservative

evangelical [predominately white] Christian couples chiefly in the United States that promotes procreation, and sees children as a blessing from God, advocating to its members to avoid all forms of birth control, including natural family planning and sterilization. People I have know that have grown up in large families (one had 14 kids, 2 have had 12 kids) have told me they never felt very close to their parents because their parents never really had any quality time to spend with them. The friend who has 14 kids in her family said that the older children were “assigned” to take care of the younger. My “Quiverfull” visually asks the questions “Is more, better? Are children subjects in a community or objects in a collection?”

With my next piece “Blockhead Community” (Figure 7) I chose to take my faces to a more realistic level. However I did not want to loose that sense of whimsy and playfulness. The blockhead idea evolved from sculpting cartoon like faces on Lego or Duplo type children’s 4” x 4” x 4” toy blocks to attaching sculpted from real life cast faces on hand built 7” x 8” x 8” and 14” x 8” x 8” stoneware blocks.

Capturing these faces from life was an important part of this multi piece series. By placing the image of a single human face on this building block I have created a different kind of literal “block-head”. In the English language, the term “blockhead”⁷ is a derogatory word for “stupid person”. When I intermingle that blockhead with other blockheads, some with one face, some with two faces, I build a visual image of a community of

relationships: lovers, friends and family members [past and present], changing the meaning from a negative (breaking down) to a positive (building up).

Forty blocks stacked four high are set on three layers of cinder blocks set At a 90 degree angle. Missing blocks in the structure allow people on the other side to peer through at those looking back, possibly creating momentary relationships between the viewers themselves. All of the faces' eyes are closed except for one. That image is not a sculpted image but a photographic decal of my father who recently passed. The majority of the facial expressions appear in a sleeplike or dreamlike state, with the exception of one who's lips form a kiss and the other who is caught in a scream. The screaming blockhead is not located within the wall-like structure, but set apart from the blockhead community.

Although I used the same glaze recipe on all the blockheads, variations of the color could have taken place due to glaze application, kiln temperature variations, placement in the kiln and minor differences in the clay body.

People are not all the same so why should my blockheads be?

Casting these faces pushed my patience and technical abilities to new levels. The casting process required many steps which involved series of castings and molds with Moulage, plaster bandage, plaster, plaster on plaster and finally clay. The rubber Moulage is flexible, gentle on the skin and captures great facial details, but lacks the strength to cast clay directly from the mold. The plaster bandage or wrap holds the Moulage mold in

place to allow for plaster to be poured into the mold. Since clay is the desired medium for the final piece, the Moulage mold has to be converted into plaster positive is cast into a plaster negative to become a plaster press mold which has both the strength and drying capabilities needed to form the clay positive. Once the clay is fired its strength allows me to stack the blockheads. Both the ideal properties and limitations of each material specifically affect the process. The step by step detailed instructions of how the life like casts were made can be found in Appendix A.

I have cast a total of 59 faces of different sizes and shapes. I have grown tremendously from this experience by strengthening old relationships and forging new. I have the utmost respect for every one of my models because it took a level of trust for them to let me cover their faces with warm rubber and then have to breathe out of straws for up to thirty minutes. Having them see their own face staring back at them in the images on the blockheads allowed me to participate in their own self discovery. We are used to seeing ourselves in a mirror or in a photograph, but seeing ourselves in 3D is new adventure.

“Luciferous⁸ Logolepsy”^{9,10} (Figure 8) was a piece that was inspired by the acquisition of an old magazine rack. The original name for the series was called “Big Words”, but it was suggested I find a big word that actually describes the fascination with obscure words that would be visually defined by faces or parts of a faces. By utilizing a variety of clay treatments such as

decals, underglazes, texture, stains and firing techniques a series of ten ["9" x 12"] clay "magazine" front covers were created. The dictionary definition of these obscure English words is displayed on the wall adjacent to the piece in order for the viewers to match the words with the images.

Returning to the meaning of "face value" identified earlier substantiates this series: taking something or someone at "face value" means to accept that idea, object, or person because of the way it first looks or seems, without thinking about what else it could mean, and to accept that the idea, object, or person is exactly what it appears to be.

The first word defined is "erumpent" which means bursting forth¹¹. Pictured is a screaming face breaking through the clay (Figure 8a). The next image is that of a face with six eyes which defines the word "senocular"¹² (Figure 8b). A ghostly image of a bald headed man emerges from the next piece defining the word "pilgarlic"¹³ (Figure 8c). The face on the following piece possibly resembles Lord Voldemort's (Harry Potter's arch enemy) sister who is missing her nose (Figure 8d). Lacuna is a very old word meaning blank space or missing part¹⁴. Frittle is a relatively new word defined in the Urban Dictionary as a temporary mark on the skin caused by the impression of a textured surface¹⁵. This piece pictures an impression of a watch on the forehead of the face (Figure 8e). Prosopagnosia is a disease that causes the afflicted person the inability to recognize human faces¹⁶. The image on this piece is an unrecognizable face covered with a white glossy glaze (Figure 8f). Achilous is a word in anatomy books that

describes a creature with no lips¹⁷. The model did have lips but I removed in the sculpture process (Figure 8g)! I find the word vibrissae¹⁸ (or nose hairs) rather melodic; however its meaning is rather gross (Figure 8h). These humorous long nose hairs are anything but attractive. The word "nares" means nostrils or the nasal passages¹⁹. After making this piece I realized I did not emphasize the nostrils as well as I could of (Figure 8i). Had I buried the top of the noses and exposed more of the nostrils it would have been a better visual description. An "abecedarian"²⁰ is a person who is learning the letters of the alphabet (Figure 8j). In this last piece of the series I used the face of my youngest model and he is presently learning the alphabet!

In my piece "Have You Seen Me" (Figure 9) I cover my son's and his wife's faces with their clay faces and photograph them in everyday events from brushing their teeth, blow drying their hair, fetching beer from the fridge, sitting on the toilet, laying in bed and driving their car. These photographs are placed on hand made milk cartons mimicking those they read as children growing up in the 1980's. Missing children appeals showed up on milk cartons across the nation throughout the '80s, but by the end of the decade, the program began to fade out, primarily due to concerns over its effectiveness and complaints by pediatricians that the photos "frightened" young children. My intent is not to parody the heartbreak of a missing child but satire the nature of the decision to end the movement.

My next piece is somewhat bittersweet. In the fall of 2010 I had to take a semester off to care for my elderly parents. My father had heart failure which made it impossible for him to return home. Due to financial circumstances the decision was made to place both of them in assisted living in Indiana and sell the family home. I dropped everything I was doing and found myself overwhelmed as I: sifted through all their accumulated possessions of 59 years in the home they built; helped them decide what to keep and what to let go; took care their finances and dealt with the traumatic impact it had on them. That physically and emotionally draining discovery of lost and found memories are depicted in this piece.

"Surrounded by Memories of Home" (Figures 10a & 11) is a self portrait piece made up of 8 double faced stoneware heads suspended by rusted chains within my old wooden silkscreen frame my mother saved from my college days in the early 1970's. Pieces attached within the framework are objects gathered from their house. These objects I remembered from my childhood belonged to family members as far back as my great-great grandfather. My parents were not hoarders, just keepers of family memorabilia, and that everyday stuff you just do not want to throw out because you may need it later. My parent grew up during the Depression. They learned to make do with very little. Even the smallest of things became an important item to keep. Textures on the faces also come from the objects gathered from the house....metals my grandfather received from

YMCA tennis matches, a broken wheel from a trash container, numerous Lion Club broaches my father got for perfect attendance, my brother's key fob to the international oil rig he use to work on, WWII memorabilia my father brought home from the South Pacific, objects I was very familiar with and those I had never seen before. Bittersweet memories brought forth emotions of joy, anger, loss and laughter.

This piece is meant to be viewed from front and back. At times I got so chained to those memories I felt I could not move forward or backward... keeping my eyes closed because I did not want to see where I had been or where I was going. There were times when I would wake up at night not remembering where I was. Was I home in Frankfort? Was I in South Bend? I had been living my life thinking I knew all about my parents only to find that there were stories they had not shared. That feeling of unknowing kept me hanging on to wanting to know more, but time had run out. My father passed before the sorting was completed and my mother's memory has faded. "Surrounded by Memories of Home" is a shrine to the life they lived created from their sacred possessions they left behind.

"Faces in the Bed" (Figure 11) takes me back to a fear I had as a child and still haunts me as an adult. When I was a child, bedtime was always a fiasco at our house, especially for me. My two older brothers would hide under my bed, wait until I was almost asleep, then slink out from under the bed and frighten me. The plaster wrap forms that held the Moulage used

for casting the models faces create an implied image of a face. The box springs from my childhood bed I slept on as a youth. By placing the plaster wrap forms under the springs I have created the illusion of those "someone(s) hiding not just under, but in the bed. In the process of hanging the piece for my Grad Show one of the "faces" came loose. I made the decision not to place it back because the visual feeling it portrayed causes one to wonder where that other "someone" may be lurking. As I look at this piece it causes me to look over my shoulder thinking that other "someone" may be watching me. Maybe waiting until I am almost asleep. To this day that apprehensive feeling of someone(s) hiding under my bed, lingers in my subconscious.

From the time of our childhood we have used our faces to express emotion and recognize family, friend or foe. Our own personal identity is bound up in our faces. No words need to be spoken for the human face to communicate.

The whimsical cartoon like faces of my youth playfully expose stereotypes as shallow and hollow. I started with the whimsical because most of us can relate to the cartoon characters of our childhood. Using humor rather than direct confrontation prevents emotional escalation and allows me to express and the viewer to imagine interpretations that could be both deeper and fuller. Seeing from a different perspective can lead to changed attitudes. The recent experiences of losing my "Daddy" , placing my "Mommy" in

institutional care and having to sell my childhood home took my art from a “childlike caricature” level of innocence to a more “adult” level of real world erudition. Building from the whimsical cartoon-like faces I progress to a more realistic aspect using actual faces to foster and build relationships [Blockhead Community] and illustrate humorous interpretations of the language we speak as mature and educated adults [Luciferous Logolepsy]. Not all my “Face Value” parody is humorous, but I hope it does force the viewer to examine reasons for behavior, feelings, the decisions we make, and the effect of those decisions on ourselves and people around us. Is what we see, what we really get?

IMAGE SECTION: Figures 1-2



Figure 1
Head case
2009
Porcelain Bisque and cardboard
8.75" x 5.75" x 4.5"



Figure 2
Eggheads
2009
High Fire stoneware and paper
12" x 8" x 3"

IMAGE SECTION: Figures 3-4



Figure 3
Boneheads

2009

Porcelain Bisque, paper, Styrofoam & BBQ Sauce

20" x 10" x 5"



Figure 4
Shish-Ka-Bobs

2009

Saggur Fired Porcelain, metal & charcoal

15" Diameter x 16"

IMAGE SECTION: Figures 5-6



Figure 5

Headline

2009

Saggar fired & high fire glazed stoneware and porcelain,
low fire terra cotta, and wood

4' x 3.5" x 5"



Figure 6

Quiver Full

2011

Porcelain Bisque, wood, foam rubber & clear vinyl

30" x 9" x 3"

IMAGE SECTION: Figures 7-8



Figure 7
Blockhead Community
2012
Glazed Stoneware & cinder block
56" x 10.5' x 8"



Figure 8
Luciferous Logolespy
2012
Glazed Stoneware & metal
5' x 22" x 2'

IMAGE SECTION: Figures 8a – 8f

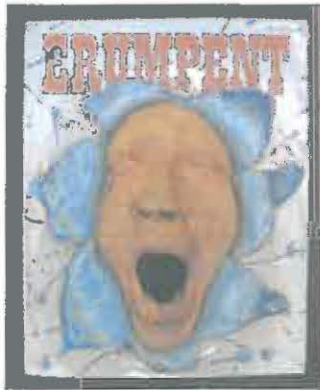


Figure 8a
Erumpent



Figure 8b
Senocular



Figure 8c
Pilgarlic

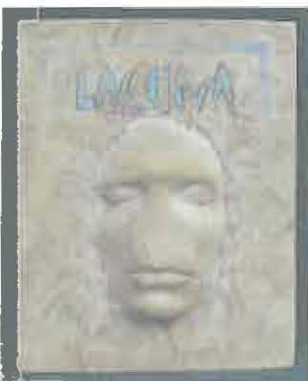


Figure 8d
Lacuna



Figure 8e
Frittle



Figure 8f
Prosopgnostia

IMAGE SECTION: Figures 8g- 8j

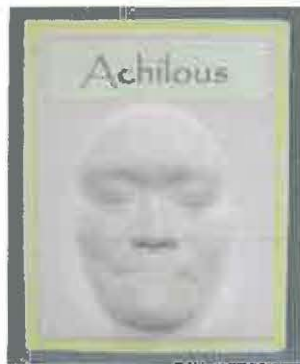


Figure 8g
Achilous



Figure 8h
Vibrissae

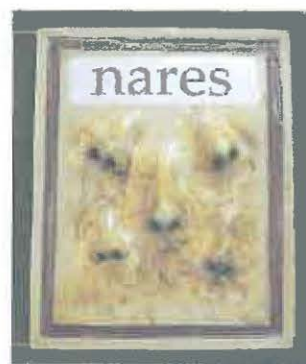


Figure 8i
Nares



Figure 8j
Abecedarin

IMAGE SECTION: Figures 9 - 10



Figure 9
Have You Seen Me?
2011
Glazed Stoneware & Cardboard
7" x 21" x 17"



Figure 10a
Surrounded by Memories of Home
2011
Stoneware, wood, metal & found objects
36" x 27" x 7"



Figure 10b

IMAGE SECTION: Figure 11



Figure 11
Faces in the Bed
2012
Wood, metal, & plaster wrap
73" x 37" x 9"

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APPENDIX A

Making Faces: Using mold-making materials and processes to replicate faces in sculpture.



Step 1:

Moulage can be obtained online or purchased locally at Blinks Art Store.

PLEASE READ THE DIRECTIONS BEFORE USING!



Step 2: Make sure it is cut into small $\frac{1}{2}$ " pieces.



Step 3: Moulage can be heated in a microwave or double boiler. Microwaving Moulage will eventually break down its molecular structure rendering it useless.



Step 4: While Moulage is being heated to a liquid state, provide a comfortable place for your model to lay down at about a 30

degree angle. I used a beach lounger. It is easy to store and transport.



Step 5: I use a thin piece of foam rubber to keep the Moulage from getting into the hair and ears. Place a small amount of Vaseline on the eyebrows and eyelashes.



Step 6: Make sure to photograph a front and profile of your models face. Which will be needed later provide an image to sculpt from if the plaster cast is not adequately detailed.



Step 7: Have your plaster bandages (rigid wrap from Michaels) cut in several different lengths and placed in a container for easy access.



Step 8: Have your model practice breathing through straws while they wait (straws from McDonald's are the best size). Have the model hold the straws themselves...so they feel a sense of control. AND do not cover or bump the straws during this process.



Step 9: The Moulage needs to cool to 115-110 degrees F. My rule of thumb is... if it is too hot for me to hold in my bare hands it is too hot to put on someone's face. Use a meat or candy thermometer to check the temperature. Also have some safety signals to indicate if model is ok or not since they will be unable to speak for 20-30 minutes.



Step 10: Start the pour from the top of the head so the model can indicate if it is too hot or ok to continue. The directions say to paint it on; however it cools too quickly for you to complete the cast if you are microwaving.



Step 11: Continue to pour making sure Moulage touches the entire skin surface on the face or you will have air pockets.



Step 12: Continue to ask the model if they are ok. Although it feels like a relaxing hot facialbreathing out of straws for 20-30 minutes can be disconcerting.



Step 13: New Moulage is very sticky so try to keep your hands wet, which keeps Moulage from sticking to them.



Step 14: It takes about 5-10 minutes for the Moulage to cool and harden enough to start applying the plaster wrap. Dip your plaster wrap in a bowl of clean cool water.



Step 15: Apply smaller strips around the nose first since that is the weakest part of the rubbery cast.



Step 16: Continue to apply the plaster wrap until the entire facial area is covered about 3-4 layers thick....try to avoid getting plaster on your models skin...curing plaster can burn.



Step 17: Plaster cures through a chemical process; however a warm blow dryer can remove some of the moisture which seems to speed up the process for making it hard enough to remove from the face.



Step 18: Continue check to see if model is comfortable and breathing.



Step 19: Let your model know you are ready to remove cast... from the top at forehead, gently pull down.



Step 20: The cast image is a negative to the naked eyes; however the camera flips the image to a positive.



Step 21: Within 24-48 hours a plaster positive cast must be made from the Moulage negative. The Moulage will begin to dry out even when kept in a Ziplock bag. You may need to enforce the cast with clay to hold the plaster positive.



Step 22: Plaster was poured and is setting up.



Step 23: Finished plaster positive. Make two positives just in case one brakes in the plaster casting process. Remove as many bumps and imperfections in the cast.



Step 24: Once the plaster positive has been removed from the Moulage cast, wash the Moulage in hot soapy water, rinse and return to the bucket by cutting into small pieces.



Step 25: After allowing the plaster face (positive) to cure for 5 to 10 days, I prepare it for casting a plaster press mold (negative) for clay. Fill in any undercuts with clay.



Step 26: Placing the metal frame to hold the plaster.



Step 27: Plaster has been poured and sets up enough to remove metal sides. (30 minutes)



Step 28: Plaster mold needs to cure for 5-10 days...then clay can be pressed into mold...and left to sit over night covered loosely with plastic bag



Step 29: Clay positive image is carefully pulled from the mold after it has dried sufficiently.



Step 30: Clay is trimmed from sides.



Step 32: Face is sculpted where image requires and clay is carved out of the back to make it a consistent thickness and ready to attach to whatever structure desired.

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